Politics, National Identity, and Democracy: A Comparison of Haredi Political Attitudes and Behavior in the United States and Israel

by Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe, David N. Myers, Mark Trencher, and Chaya Lehrfield-Trop

One of the tasks of this volume has been to bring to wider public attention contemporary research that explores the social, cultural, and political proclivities of Haredim today. This recent scholarship is obviously not a creation *ex nihilo* but builds on the work of earlier generations of scholars. These prior generations include scholars who brought a sociological lens to the study of Haredi society and culture (e.g., Menachem Friedman, Samuel Heilman, William Helmreich, George Kranzler, Egon Mayer, Solomon Poll, and Israel Rubin), as well as those trained in political science (e.g., Asher Cohen, Eliezer Don-Yehiya, Charlies Liebman, and Bernard Susser). In the past decade, there has also been a noticeable uptick in research devoted to Haredi political thinking and activity, particularly in Israel, where Haredim have become a ubiquitous and often decisive presence in public life (for example, the work of Itamar Ben Ami, Benjamin Brown, Kimmy Caplan, Yohai Hakak, Motti Inbari, Nissim Leon, Daniel Mahla, Heather Munro, and Elisheva Rosman-Stollman). In the United States, there has been renewed interest in the political impact of Haredim following the intense, COVID-19-driven "moment" of 2020, when long-standing alliances and assumptions gave way to a new and sharper form of political expression and activity.

Even in the midst of this efflorescence of scholarship, what has been studied and understood less are the attitudes and behavior of every-day members

of Haredi communities—as distinct from the political thinking and acts of rabbinic leaders such as Rav Schach, Rav Ovadia, the Lubavitcher Rebbe or the various and competing Satmar Rebbes.[1] This article brings together the work of two research teams, one based in the United States and the other in Israel, that worked in parallel with the goal of identifying the political attitudes, voting behavior, and civic identities of Haredim in those two realms. In the next two sections, the article offers a quick survey of these attitudes and identities in each of the two cases before offering in Section 3 a comparative analysis of them in Haredi societies in the United States and Israel.

It should be noted that there are many commonalities between the two communities, beginning with a belief in strict and sustained separation from general society in all domains of life, including in residential areas, and education (which in Israel is state-funded). Both communities also place great value on Torah study (though a key difference in Israel is that some 45% of Haredi men often devote their entire lives to study, while it appears that a much smaller number in the US do). And both communities maintain the view that they are "in exile," dwelling in an unredeemed world under political regimes that are not rooted in Torah-true values.

These similarities help set off a key difference in the way in which politics is practiced in the two communities, which is, itself, a reflection of two diverse political cultures. In Israel, Haredim are represented in the electoral process by political parties such as Agudath Israel, United Torah Judaism, and Shas, whose leaders consult with rabbis to gain guidance but function as full-time politicians. Over the course of nearly six decades, since the 1967 War and again in the *mahapakh* (the "upending" that marked a right-ward shift toward the Likud party) of 1977, Jewish religious parties have moved from a position of subordinate allies to the center of governance and power. This move to the center has been accompanied and facilitated by the rise of the "HarDaLim," a word that combines "haredi" and *dati le'umi* (religious Zionist); the HarDaLim blend the values, strategies, sense of threat, and agency of the ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist camps.[2] In the government of Benjamin Netanyahu formed in the wake of the elections of 2022, a figure such as Bezalel Smotrich represents not only the HarDaLi wing of the Jewish political spectrum, but its growing proximity to power (as Finance Minister and the chief civilian authority overseeing Israeli settlement in the West Bank).

In the United States, Haredim are represented not by political parties of their own but rather by community activists (*askunim*), usually closely affiliated with rabbinic leaders, who serve in important, but unelected positions as

intercessors and negotiators with secular political authorities. In both cases, the communities seek to leverage their internal discipline through ideological cohesiveness and an established leadership structure to gain benefits for their members.

As Haredim continue to grow in absolute and relative numbers, it is reasonable to assume that their political influence will also continue to grow. This will likely bring on increased tensions between long-standing Haredi principles of communal cohesion and strict adherence to Jewish law, on one hand, and values emblematic of the wider political culture such as tolerance, individualism, and democracy. As Haredim constitute an ever-expanding slice of the Jewish demographic pie, it will be interesting to see how their persistent and well-developed ability to accommodate to secular political regimes, from pre-war Europe to post-War Israeli and diaspora communities, fares.

1. THE AMERICAN CASE

How do Haredim think of themselves as political actors and members of American society? It was this set of questions that prompted Mark Trencher and David Myers to undertake a pair of surveys of Orthodox Jews in 2023–2024. The surveys were conducted by Nishma Research, with the assistance of the Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History at UCLA. The first survey, devoted to Orthodox Jewish political attitudes, was published in September 2023.[3]

Participants were invited to take part in the study through email blasts, notifications to WhatsApp Groups and WhatsApp Status lists, and an Opt-In list of past Nishma Research surveys. The survey ran between August 20–29, 2023. The sample consisted of 1,224 self-identified Haredi respondents (out of a total of 2,551), of whom 40% were female. In terms of intra-group affiliation, 36% were Hasidish (including Chabad), 33% identified as Yeshivish/Agudah/Litvish, and 20% identified as other, though leaned Haredi.

Among the key findings of the survey were:

- 63% of Haredim in the US identified as Republicans, and 90% planned to vote for a Republican in the 2024 election (as opposed to 11% who identify as Democrats and 10% who plan to vote for a Democrat in the 2024 election).
- This party affiliation is long-standing. Over the past forty-four years since 1980, more than 80% of Haredim have voted for Republican presidential candidates—with only two exceptions: in 1992, when 65% of Haredim voted for

George H. W. Bush (vs. 34% for Bill Clinton), and 1996, when Clinton received 55% vs. Bob Dole (45%).

- 73% maintain that "being an American" is a somewhat or very important part of their identity; an equal number are somewhat proud or very proud to be American.
- 88% assert that democracy is important or very important to them.
- 80% vote always or most of the time in elections.
- 41% declare that they often or sometimes are told for whom to vote; in the largest number of cases (67%), they are told by community leaders (*askunim*), followed by rabbis, and family members.
- 51% describe themselves as somewhat or strongly Zionist.

A second survey, which was intended to gauge shifts in attitudes after the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7, was completed in February 2024.[4] This survey attracted 1,307 Modern Orthodox and Haredi respondents. In general, the two surveys raise a pair of methodological questions: how representative was the sampling given that there is no comprehensive census of the Orthodox community in the United States? And given that the survey was conducted online, what segment of the Haredi community did this survey attract, in light of the fact that a considerable minority of community members might not be open or have ready access to an online survey?[5] In response, we note that the two surveys reveal a good deal of consistency in their findings, suggesting a strong conservative orientation, which, one might surmise, would likely comport with the attitudes of "off-line" Haredim. It is also important to note in the survey the disconnect among Haredim between self-identifying as a Zionist and feeling a close bond to Israel; this clearly sets them apart from Modern Orthodox Jews, for whom Zionist affiliation and connection to Israel are closely linked.

Among the key findings of the second US-based survey are:

- 69% identify as Republicans/conservative/libertarian (vs. 63% who identified as Republican in September 2023), whereas 92% plan to vote for Donald Trump (versus 90% surveyed in September 2023). Only 9% identified as Democrat/liberal in February 2024.
- 45% of Haredim describe their upbringing as strongly or somewhat Zionist (as opposed to 86% of Modern Orthodox); 51% of Haredim describe themselves as somewhat or strongly Zionist today.
- 94% of Haredim feel strongly (84%) or somewhat (11%) connected to Israel.
- 64% of Haredim report that their feelings for Israel became stronger after October 7.

2. THE ISRAELI CASE

The Israeli survey was conducted by Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe and Chaya Lehfield-Trop in May 2024 through the Tatay Research Institute for the purposes of this paper. Its questions were based on those posed in the two Nishma Research studies. Israeli participants were invited to take part in the survey through banners published on the largest Haredi website in Israel and worldwide, Kikar Ha-Shabbat (Shabbat Square), which attracted over 3.5 million unique visits to the site each month during the past year. After clicking on the banner, participants were directed to a study designed to examine their attitudes toward the political attitudes, along with questions about respondents' identity. The survey ran between May 15–19, 2024, and drew 661 participants, of whom 46% were female. Of those who participated, 45% were Lithuanian, 23% Mizrachi, 25% Hasidic, and 7% identify as other.

Among the key findings were:

- Participants' mean age was 33.454 (*SD* = 11.17).
- The majority (84%) were married.
- Participants described themselves as poor. On a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (*well above average*) to 5 (*well below average*), their mean assessment of income was 4.1 (SD = 2.12).
- In terms of their political stance, 15% identified as extreme right, 44% as right, 31% as moderate right, 8% as centrist, and 2% as moderate left.
- 59% maintain that "being Israeli" is a somewhat or very important part of their identity; 58% are somewhat proud or very proud to be Israeli.
- 70% assert that democracy is important or very important to them.
- 95% vote always or most of the time in elections.
- 63% declare that they often or sometimes are told for whom to vote; in the largest number of cases (95%), they are told by rabbis, followed by community leaders (*askunim*) (18%), followed by family members (13%).
- 47% describe their approach to Zionism as positive to some or a large extent.

3. COMPARING HAREDI ATTITUDES IN THE US AND ISRAEL

This paper presents an opportunity to bring together key findings from the two surveys of Haredi communities in Israel and the US. This comparison allows us to disaggregate the larger transnational group of Haredim into smaller national cohorts—and thereby to highlight attitudinal differences emerging out of the

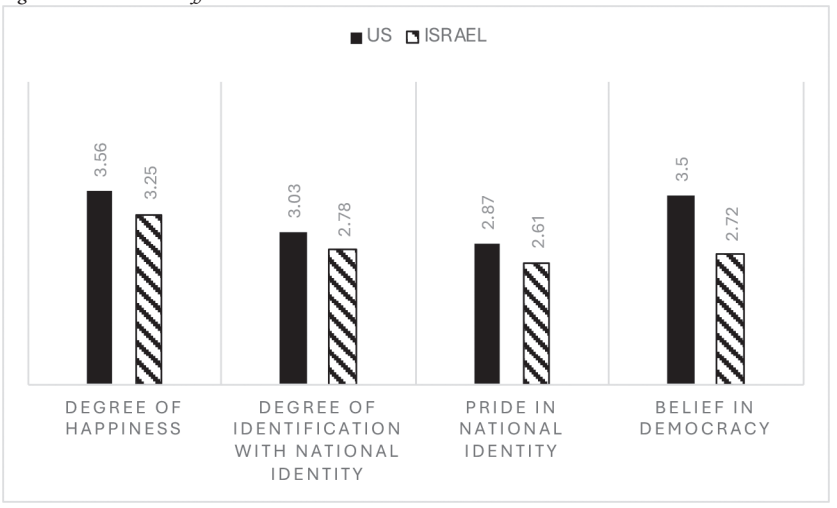
distinct national contexts. The comparison focuses on a number of questions that were asked in both surveys, including:

1. In general, describe whether you are happy in life.
2. Do you believe that being Israeli or American is an important part of your identity?
3. How important is democracy to you? Are you proud to be an American?
4. Does anyone tell you for whom to vote in elections? If so, who?

Among the key findings of the combined surveys:

- American Haredim declare themselves to be considerably happier than Israelis.[6]
- More American Haredim identify with or are proud to be American than Israeli Haredim identify with or are proud to be Israeli.[7]
- More American Haredim express appreciation for democracy than Israeli Haredim.[8]
- American Haredim feel much more connected to Israel then Israeli Haredim feel to diaspora Jews.[9]
- Fewer Israeli Haredim declare themselves to feel Zionist then American Haredim (47% vs. 51%).[10]

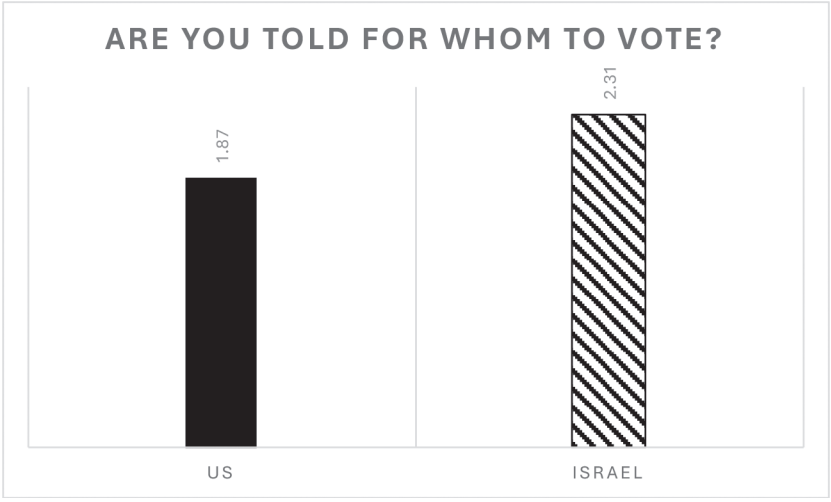
Figure 1. Attitudinal differences between Israeli and American Haredim[11]



The next measure was whether there is a difference between the communities regarding the question of who tells you how to vote. Here again we found a significant difference between the two groups. In short, Israeli Haredim were

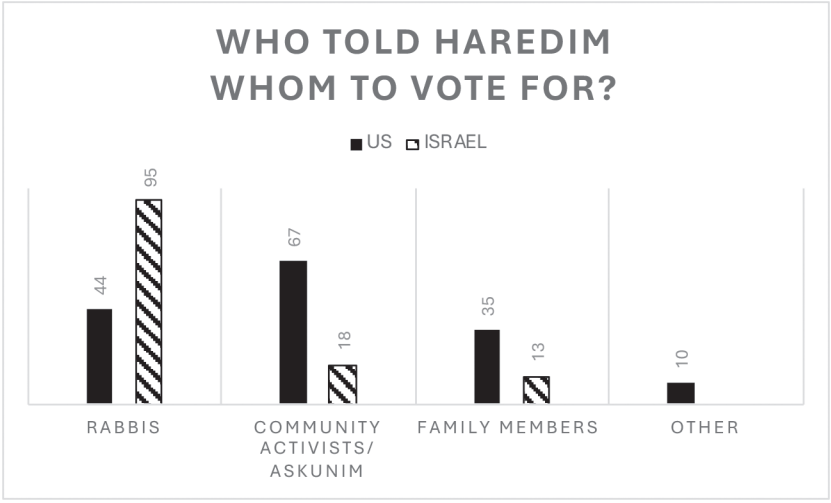
significantly more likely to be told for whom to vote than Haredim in the United States.[12]

Figure 2. Comparison of perceived voting influence in the US and Israel



To the question of who tells Israeli and American Haredim to vote, there was a notable difference. For Haredim in the US, community activists (*askunim*) and family members were more likely to influence their votes than in Israel, where rabbis were more likely to offer guidance.

Figure 3. Sources of voting influence among Haredim in the US and Israel



The surveys revealed a number of interesting correlations in the American sample:

- Happiness stood in inverse relationship to one's identity as an American.
- By contrast, there was a positive correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote.
- Identity as an American is strongly and positively correlated with pride in being American ($r = .564$, $p < .001$) and support for democracy ($r = .226$, $p < .001$).
- By contrast, identity had a weak negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -094$, $p < .001$).
- Pride in being American had a positive correlation with support for democracy ($r = .260$, $p < .001$) and a weak negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -.090$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between pride and happiness.[13]

A similar correlation analysis was done for Israeli Haredim with some notable differences. For example:

- There was a weak positive correlation between happiness and democracy ($r = .085$, $p = .008$).
- Identity demonstrated a strong positive correlation with pride ($r = .628$, $p < .001$) and democracy ($r = .286$, $p < .001$), and a negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -.122$, $p = .002$).
- There was a positive correlation between pride and democracy ($r = .286$, $p < .001$) and a weak negative correlation with who tells you how to vote ($r = -.031$, $p = .004$).[14]

Survey data also highlight a significant disparity in how Israeli and American Haredi communities perceive their connection to one another. Haredi Jews in the US tend to feel a deeper connection to Israel, possibly reflecting the centrality of Israel in their religious and cultural identity, as well as the influence of education and community leadership that emphasizes solidarity with Israel. Conversely, Haredi Jews in Israel appear to have a weaker connection to diaspora Jewry, which could be the result of a stronger focus on local community life, or to a lesser degree of exposure to Jewish communities outside of Israel. This discrepancy may also indicate broader differences in the degree of insularity and understanding of Jewishness outside of their own community.

Figure 4. Sense of connection to Jews in Israel/Diaspora among US and Israeli Jews

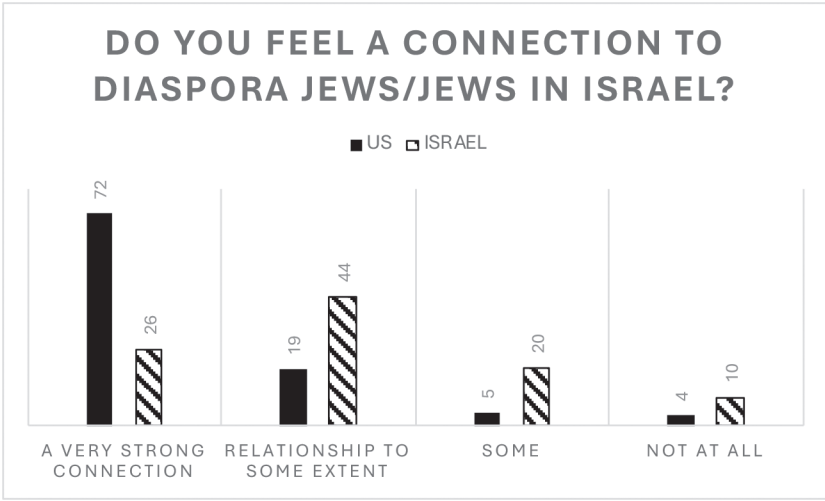


Figure 5. Attitudes toward Zionism among US and Israeli Haredim

This finding also supplements data on attitudes to Zionism, which reveal that American Jews are slightly more Zionist than Israelis. This figure affirms the higher degree of connection of US-based Haredim to Israel and Israeli Jews and the greater disconnection of Israel-based Haredim to those outside of their community.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper joins a growing body of research on the political life and perspective of Haredi Jews. Its particular contribution is to highlight the attitudes and behaviors of Haredim as political actors and voters in Israel and the United States through a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods. A comparison of the two groups reveals both similarities and differences. In the first regard, Haredim in both contexts are conservative in their political disposition: American Haredim have consistently voted Republican in presidential elections since 1980; Israel Haredim, as Nissim Leon shows in his paper in this volume, have become increasingly identified with right-wing parties since 1977. At the same time, American Haredim appear to be more comfortable than Israeli Haredim in their relationship to the polity to which they belong; they express more identification with and sense of belonging to the United States than Israeli Haredim do toward Israel. They also are more firmly committed to democracy than their Israeli peers.

Both groups have a famously transactional relationship to government. Israeli Haredim engage in party politics in order to promote issues of great concern to them that include, as our survey data show: the economy and inflation, the security situation, funding for education, and health. In comparison, American Haredim mobilize their formidable political networks to attend to their issues of greatest concern: the economy, crime, Israel, antisemitism, and education.[15] There is another important finding. The September 2023 survey reveals that 91% of Haredim believe somewhat or strongly that the United States is a *malkhus shel hesed*, a rather unique "kingdom of grace" in the annals of the Jewish Diaspora.[16] More research is necessary to provide empirical grounding, but it is reasonable to assume, given their historical antipathy to Zionism, that many Haredim in Israel regard the state as a necessary evil or worse, but not as a kingdom of grace.

This paper is but a cornerstone of a future edifice of research that tracks the political attitudes and voting behavior of Haredim. It will be important to focus, especially in the US case, on both national and local levels, where there are different interests, affiliations, and, in all likelihood, voting patterns. It will also be necessary to trace the way in which ongoing Haredi immersion in the world of the Internet may alter social and political norms, either by opening new perspectives or producing a sharp conservative backlash. What is clear, above all, is that Haredim are an increasingly significant part of a transnational Jewish world, although, as we have endeavored to show, far from a monolith.

Notes

1 In the American case, an important exception in investigating Haredi voting behavior is Nathaniel Deutsch, "'Borough Park Was a Red State': Trump and the Haredi Vote," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 3 (2017): 158–73, https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.22.3.08. See also Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 376–96. Meanwhile, the various research initiatives of the Israel Democracy Institute generate valuable data and insight into many aspects of Haredi life in Israel, though relatively little on political attitudes and behavior. See https://en.idi.org.il/tags-en/2081.

2. On the "HarDaLim," see Yair Sheleg, *Ha-Hardalim: Historiyah, Ideologiyah. Kokhot* [Haredi Zionists: History, Ideology, Presence] (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2020), https://www.idi.org.il/media/15255/the-zionist-ultra-orthodox-history-ideology-presence.pdf. See also Daniel Mahla, "Convergence of Fundamentalisms? Ultra-Orthodox Nationalists (*Hardalim*) in Israel," *Zeitschrift* 7 (2023): 151–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-022-00122-3.

3. See Mark Trencher and David N. Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors: Haredi and Modern Orthodox Sectors," Nishma Research, September 2023, https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Orthodox%20Jewish%20Political%20Attitudes%20and%20Behaviors%20September%202023.pdf.

4. See Mark Trencher and David N. Myers, "Israel, Zionism, Politics, and the Impact of Israel's War with Hamas," Nishma Research, February 2024, https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Israel,%20Zionism,%20Politics,%20Impact%20of%20War%20With%20Hamas%20-%20February%202024.pdf.

5. These questions are relevant for all surveys of the Haredi community. The studies cited above (nn. 2–3) and others deal with them in various ways, such as engagement through known organizations and publications that Haredim use and respect, as well as some stratified sample weighting.

6. Happiness scores between the two groups ($F = 15.697$, $p < .001$) $t(1264.824) = 8.159$, $p < .001$, (95% CI: 0.234 to 0.383), with a standard error of 0.038.

7. On the identity measure, a significant difference was found in identity scores, $t(1379.803) = 6.671$, $p < .001$. The mean difference was 0.249 (95% CI [0.175, 0.322]), with a standard error of 0.037. On the level of pride in national identity, the analysis revealed a significant difference in pride scores, $t(1336.916) = 4.941$, $p < .001$.

8. There was a statistically significant difference in democracy scores between the two groups, $t(1178.973) = 13.858$, $p < .001$.

9. $t(1192.013) = 16.308$, $p < .001$, two-tailed), with a large mean difference of 0.693 (95% CI [0.609, 0.776]).

10. (1540.073) = 0.342, p = .732, two-tailed), with a small mean difference of 0.016 (95% CI [-0.075, 0.106]).
11. For clarity and ease of interpretation, all scales in the graphs are coded as 1 being not at all and 5 to a large extent converted from the original scale.
12. t(1187.460) = -10.480, p < .001 (two-tailed). The mean difference was -0.443 (95% CI [-0.526, -0.360]), with a standard error of 0.042.
13. This table illustrates the correlation between variables in the American sample:

Variable	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Happiness	--				
2. Identity	-.041	--			
3. Pride	-.023	.564**	--		
4. Democracy	.081**	.226**	.260**	--	
5. Who tells you what to vote	.052	-.094**	-.090**	-.088**	--

14. This table illustrates the correlation between variables in the Israeli sample:

Variable	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Happiness	--				
2. Identity	-.155**	--			
3. Pride	-.020	.628**	--		
4. Democracy	-.085*	.286**	.286**	--	
5. Who tells you what to vote	-.122**	-.206**	.180**	-.031	--

15. See Trencher and Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors," section on "Importance of Issue as a Voter," 8.
16. Trencher and Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors," section on "Perceptions of the United States," 11.

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